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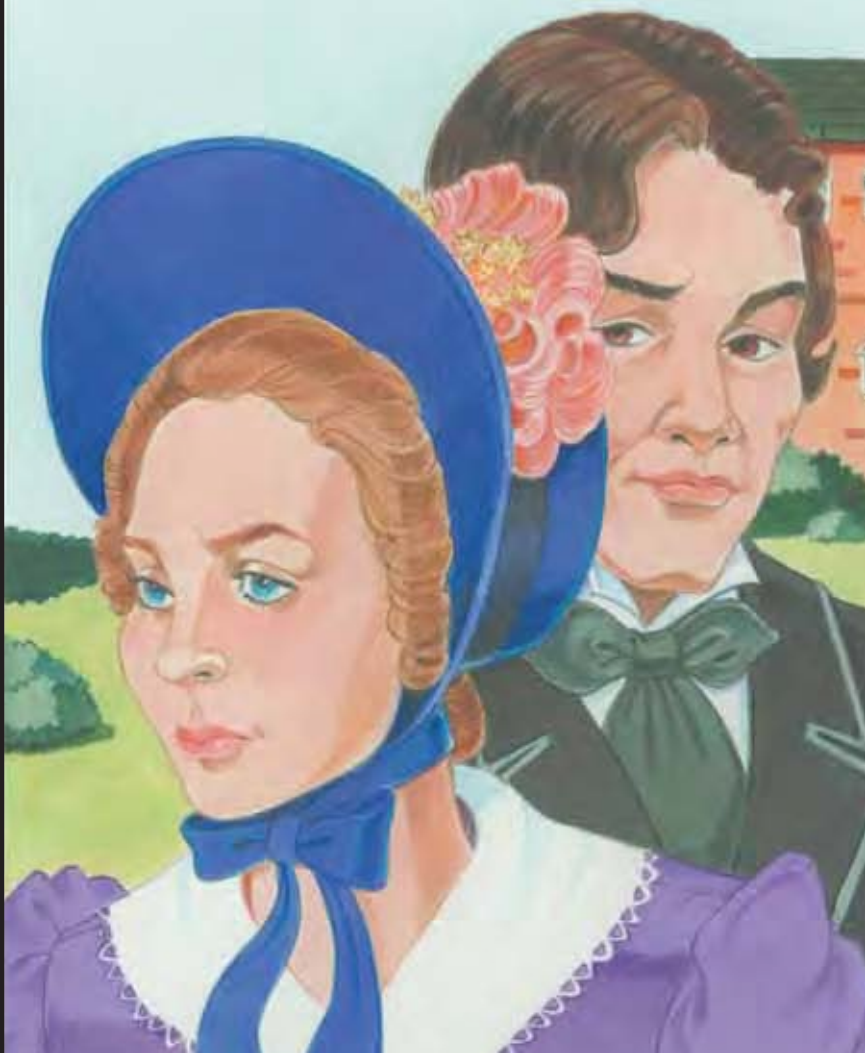
PRIDE and PREJUDICE

JANE AUSTEN



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Pride and Prejudice

JANE AUSTEN

ADAPTED BY

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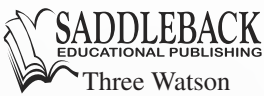

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CONTENTS

1 A New Neighbor 5

2 Netherfield Hall 12

3 A Visitor Arrives 18

4 Wickham's Story 25

5 Jane's Disappointment 32

6 Elizabeth Visits Charlotte 38

7 Darcy Admits the Truth 44

8 A Letter for Elizabeth 50

9 Elizabeth Changes Her Mind 57

10 A Family Scandal 64

11 Lydia's Return 70

12 Three Married Daughters 75

1 A New Neighbor

There is one truth that most women agree upon: A young, single man with a good income must be needing a wife.

When such a young man moves into a neighborhood, he may not be aware of his need for a wife. But his neighbors are well aware of it. In fact, he is considered the property of one or another of their daughters.

Mrs. Bennet had heard the nearby estate, Netherfield Park, had just been rented. She was very eager to tell her husband.

"My dear Mr. Bennet, Netherfield Park has been rented at last!" his wife announced.

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" she asked impatiently.

"You want to tell me," Mr. Bennet said, "and I have no objection to hearing it."

"His name is Bingley," Mrs. Bennet said. "He is a single man with a large fortune—four or five thousand a year! What a fine opportunity for our girls!"

"How so?" Mr. Bennet inquired. "How can it affect them?"

"Oh, my dear Mr. Bennet!" his wife cried. "How can you be so tiresome? You must know what I am thinking. Perhaps he will marry one of them. You must call on him just as soon as he arrives."

"I see no reason for that," Mr. Bennet said.

"Mr. Bennet, you seem to take delight in provoking me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves," his wife complained.

"You mistake me, my dear," Mr. Bennet chuckled. "I have nothing but the highest respect for your nerves. I've heard you talk about them for 20 years at least."

Mr. Bennet was an odd mixture of reserve and sarcastic humor. His poor wife didn't understand him. Her mind, however, was less difficult to understand. She knew little and

understood little. The business of her life was to get her five daughters married.

Mr. Bennet, in fact, was one of the first to visit Mr. Bingley. He revealed this news one evening when his second oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was decorating a hat. "I hope Mr. Bingley will like it," he said quietly.

His wife sighed. "I'm afraid we shall never know what Mr. Bingley likes. In fact, I am sick of Mr. Bingley."

"Why did you not tell me so before?" Mr. Bennet said. "I wouldn't have visited him."

His family's astonishment was just what he had wished! His daughters, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Catherine, and Lydia, were speechless. And Mrs. Bennet was the most surprised of all. But she pretended that she knew all along her husband would visit Mr. Bingley.

To the Bennet family's delight, Mr. Bingley attended the next ball. With him, he brought his two sisters, the husband of the eldest sister, and another young man.

Mr. Bingley was a good-looking man. His manners were easy and unaffected. His sisters were fine, fashionable women. His brother-

in-law, Mr. Hurst, looked like an average gentleman. But his friend Mr. Darcy drew most of the attention. He was tall, handsome, and noble-looking. Within five minutes of his arrival, almost everyone knew he had an income of ten thousand a year. For half the evening, everyone admired him. Then their feelings turned to disgust, for they discovered what a proud fellow he was.

While Bingley danced every dance, Mr. Darcy mostly stood alone. At one point, Bingley urged his friend to join in the fun.

Elizabeth Bennet was nearby. She overheard their conversation. Since there were few men to dance with, she was sitting down.

"Come, Darcy!" Bingley urged his friend. "I must insist that you dance."

"I certainly shall not!" Darcy said. "Your sisters have other partners, and you are dancing with the only pretty girl in the room." He looked over at Jane Bennet.

"Oh, yes! She is the most beautiful girl I ever saw!" Bingley agreed. "But her younger sister, Elizabeth, is sitting down just behind you. She is very pretty, too."

Darcy turned and studied Elizabeth for a moment. "She is tolerable," he said coldly, "but not pretty enough to tempt me."

After the men walked off, Elizabeth told her friends the story with great spirit. She had a lively, playful personality. She loved to laugh and make others laugh, too.

After the ball, Jane and Elizabeth were talking. Jane confessed that she liked Mr. Bingley a great deal.

"I was very flattered that he asked me to dance a second time," Jane told her sister. "I

didn't dare to expect such a compliment."

"Did you not?" Elizabeth asked. "I did. Well, he seems very agreeable, so I'm pleased that you like him. Heaven knows, you've liked many a stupider person."

"*Lizzy!*" Jane protested.

Elizabeth smiled. "Oh, you never see a fault in anybody," she said. "In all my life, I've never heard you speak ill of a single human being! You have good sense—but you are blind to the nonsense of others."

Back at Netherfield Park, Darcy and Bingley also discussed the ball. Bingley said he had never met more pleasant people in his life. And as for Miss Jane Bennet, he couldn't imagine an angel more beautiful! Darcy, on the other hand, had no interest in anyone at the ball. He agreed that Jane Bennet was very pretty—but he thought she smiled too much.

The two friends had very different characters. Darcy admired his friend's easiness and openness. Bingley valued Darcy's opinion and judgment. Darcy was well-bred, but stiff. His manners were not inviting, and he often offended people. Bingley was very popular.

The Lucas family lived quite near the Bennets. Sir William Lucas had made a great fortune in trade. He'd even been knighted! After receiving this honor, however, he'd given up business entirely.

Lady Lucas was an especially good kind of woman. Charlotte, her oldest daughter, was sensible and intelligent. She was also a close friend of Elizabeth Bennet's.

The morning after the ball, the Bennets and the Lucases were gathered at Lucas Lodge. Everyone had something to say about Mr. Darcy's behavior.

"His pride doesn't offend me as pride often does," Charlotte said. "He's a fine young man, with family and fortune—he has a *right* to be proud!"

"I could easily forgive his pride," said Elizabeth, "if he had not mortified mine."

"If I were you, Lizzy," her mother said, "I would not dance with him *ever*."

"I believe, ma'am, I can promise I shall *never* dance with him!" Elizabeth assured her.

Netherfield Hall

The more Mr. Bingley saw of Jane, the more he seemed to like her. As for Jane, Elizabeth could tell that her sister was falling in love. But Elizabeth was pleased to see that Jane refused to show her feelings. That would keep her safe from the suspicions and teasing of others. Elizabeth mentioned this to Charlotte Lucas.

"It's not always good to be so guarded," Charlotte said. "If a woman hides her affection, she may lose the man she likes."

"Jane does help him on—as much as her nature will allow," Elizabeth explained. "But whenever she sees him, it's in a large party. She really doesn't know his character well."

"Of course," Charlotte said, "I wish Jane success with all my heart. But happiness in marriage is a matter of chance. I believe it is

better to know as little as possible about the faults of the person you marry."

Elizabeth smiled. "You make me laugh, Charlotte. You'd never act that way yourself."

Whenever Bingley was with her sister, Elizabeth watched closely. Meanwhile, there was one thing she failed to notice: Mr. Darcy was becoming interested in *her*.

The next time Darcy saw Elizabeth was at Lucas Lodge. Several couples were dancing at one end of the room.

Sir William Lucas remarked to Mr. Darcy, "There's nothing like dancing! I believe it's one of the true signs of fine society."

"Dancing is also popular in less fine societies," Darcy said. "Every savage can dance."

Just then, Elizabeth was moving in their direction. "Mr. Darcy," Sir William said, "you must allow me to present this young lady to you. She's a perfect dancing partner."

Sir William took Elizabeth's hand and was about to offer it to Mr. Darcy. But she instantly drew back.

"Indeed, sir," she said quickly. "I don't have the least intention of dancing."

When Mr. Darcy asked her if she would dance, Elizabeth politely refused and turned away. They didn't speak again for the rest of the evening.

But Mr. Darcy was to see Elizabeth again soon—in an unexpected manner.

One morning, Jane was invited by Bingley's sisters, Caroline and Louisa, to dine with them that evening.

Jane asked her mother for the carriage.

"No, my dear," her mother answered. "You had better go on horseback. It looks like it will rain, and then you can stay all night."

In fact, it rained hard that day. Jane was completely wet by the time she arrived. She spent the night at Netherfield Hall and was very ill when she woke up.

Hearing this, Mr. Bennet teased his wife. "Well, my dear," he said, "if your daughter should die, at least it will be for a good cause!"

"Oh, people do not die of little colds!" Mrs. Bennet said in an irritated voice.

Elizabeth was worried, however. The family carriage was not available, and she was not a horsewoman. But she was determined to

see her sister, so she decided to walk.

"We'll go as far as Meryton with you," Catherine and Lydia volunteered. Elizabeth knew that a militia regiment had recently arrived in the nearby town of Meryton. It happened that their aunt and uncle, the Philipses, lived there. Lately, Catherine and Lydia had talked of nothing but officers.

At Meryton, Elizabeth said goodbye to her sisters and went on alone. She arrived at Netherfield Hall with muddy stockings. Her face was glowing with the warmth of exercise.

Poor Jane was indeed ill with fever and headache. When Elizabeth was also invited to stay, she accepted gratefully. A servant was sent to tell the Bennet family of her plans, and to bring back a supply of clothes.

At half past six, Elizabeth was called to dinner. Everyone asked about Jane's health. Young Bingley seemed truly worried about Jane. Elizabeth warmed to his kindness.

When dinner was over, Elizabeth returned to Jane's side. As soon as she was out of the room, Mrs. Hurst said, "I shall never forget Miss Elizabeth Bennet's appearance this

morning. She actually looked almost wild."

Caroline agreed. "Why should she even come here? Why go scampering about the country just because her sister has a cold? And looking so untidy, too!"

"Your image may be correct," Bingley said, "but this was all lost on me. I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennet looked wonderfully well this morning. To me, coming here shows a deep affection for her sister."

"I think very highly of Jane Bennet," Mrs. Hurst said. "She's really a very sweet girl. I wish with all my heart that she was well married. But with such a family—and such low connections—I'm afraid there's no chance of it!"

"I've heard that their uncle, Mr. Philips, is a lawyer in Meryton," Caroline said.

Mrs. Hurst snickered. "Yes, and I believe they have another, somewhere in London, near Cheapside!"

Both sisters laughed.

Bingley looked annoyed. "If they had uncles enough to fill all of Cheapside, it would make no difference to me!"

Darcy said, "But surely you must agree, Bingley, that it hurts their chances of marrying well."

To this Bingley made no answer.

The next morning, Mrs. Bennet, along with Catherine and Lydia, came to visit Jane.

Mrs. Bennet's behavior embarrassed Elizabeth completely. First she boasted about Jane's beauty and good nature. Then she insulted Mr. Darcy. She compared him to Sir William Lucas, whom she said was far friendlier!

After seeing Jane, Mrs. Bennet announced that her daughter was too ill to be moved. She was happy to have Jane stay. Elizabeth groaned. She was eager to have her sister well—and even more eager to leave!

A Visitor Arrives

That evening, Jane was well enough to leave her room for a few hours. Bingley made sure the fire was well built up before he sat down by her. Elizabeth was delighted to see that he hardly spoke to anyone else.

While Jane and Bingley talked, Darcy took up a book. Caroline Bingley did the same—but she secretly spent most of the time watching Mr. Darcy read. Mrs. Hurst played with her rings and bracelets. Now and then she joined in her brother's conversation with Jane. Mr. Hurst went to sleep.

After a while, Caroline gave a great yawn and said, "How pleasant it is to spend a quiet evening reading!"

No one answered her. She yawned again and began walking about the room. Although her figure was elegant, Darcy didn't look up

from his book. Then she invited Elizabeth to walk about the room with her.

Now Darcy looked up. Without knowing what he was doing, he closed his book. Caroline invited him to join them, but he politely refused. He said it would interfere with their purpose.

"What do you mean by that?" Caroline demanded.

"Because you want to show off your figures by walking," Darcy answered. "I can see you much better sitting by the fire."

"Oh, how shocking!" Caroline cried out. "How shall we punish him?"

"Tease him—laugh at him," Elizabeth suggested quietly.

"No," Caroline said. "It is impossible to laugh at Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at?" Elizabeth asked mockingly. "So he has no faults at all?"

"Oh, I don't believe that's possible for anyone," Darcy said. "But all of my life I've tried to avoid faults that others might find laughable."

"Such as vanity and pride," Elizabeth said.

"Yes," Darcy agreed. "Vanity is a fault indeed. But pride—when one's mind is truly superior—that is not a fault."

Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile. Then she said, "I am convinced then. You must truly have no faults at all."

"Oh, but I do!" Mr. Darcy said. "I cannot forget or forgive the follies and vices of others. If I lose my good opinion of someone, it is lost forever."

"Yes, that is a fault indeed!" Elizabeth retorted. "But you have chosen your defect well. It really isn't laughable. It seems that your defect makes it easy for you to hate everybody."

"Your fault," Darcy said with a smile, "is to misunderstand them."

Caroline was impatient. "Now let's have a little music!" she said. She was tired of a conversation in which she had no share.

When the pianoforte was opened, Darcy was relieved. He felt more attracted to Elizabeth than he ever wanted to. If it weren't for her low connections, he feared that he could fall in love with her!

The next day, Caroline teased him about paying so much attention to Elizabeth. When Jane was well enough to travel on Sunday, Darcy was relieved to see Elizabeth leave.

Later, when the whole Bennet family was together again, Mr. Bennet announced a surprise. A young man, a stranger, was coming to visit for several days. "The visitor is my cousin, Mr. Collins," Mr. Bennet explained. "This is the gentleman who will inherit our home when I'm dead. He may turn you all out of the house if he likes."

"Oh!" Mrs. Bennet cried out. "Please don't even mention that horrid man! It's dreadful that our home will not be passed on to your own children. How unfair that the property can only be passed on to male heirs!"

"I agree. It is certainly most unfair," Mr. Bennet said. "But if you'll listen to the letter he sent me, perhaps you'll forgive him a little." The letter read:

Dear Sir:

The disagreement between yourself and my father has always made me unhappy. Now that

he has gone, I feel that it is my duty to make peace between our families. I never wished to hurt your daughters. Indeed, I am ready to make amends.

William Collins

The peacemaking Mr. Collins arrived at four o'clock. He was a tall, overweight young man. His manners were very formal.

Mr. Collins had been raised by an illiterate and stingy father. He had begun life humbly—but he had been lucky. He'd been given a living by Lady Catherine de Bourge, who lived in Kent. His new rank in life made him a mixture of pride and modesty. With the gift of "a living," he received a home, land, and appointment as the religious leader of the local church.

At dinner, Mr. Collins talked at great length about Lady Catherine. No praise was too high for her. He took pride in paying her many delicate compliments.

"Do these compliments come from the impulse of the moment?" Mr. Bennet asked. "Or do you think of them beforehand?"

"Oh, I often spend my time thinking up elegant little compliments," Mr. Collins said. "They're useful for many occasions."

Mr. Bennet smiled. He found Mr. Collins completely absurd. Now he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

Mr. Collins' motive for making amends to his cousins soon became clear. He intended to marry one of them! Jane was his first choice—until Mrs. Bennet hinted that Jane was likely to be engaged soon.

In that case, he settled on Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet was delighted! She never dreamed that she might have *two* daughters married soon! The man she'd called "horrid" the day before was now high in her good graces.

The next day, Mr. Collins walked with his cousins to Meryton. All along the way, he delivered pompous remarks. His polite cousins agreed with everything he said. As they reached Meryton, however, Lydia and Catherine began looking up and down the streets in search of officers. They spotted an officer they knew, Mr. Denny, walking with a stranger. Mr. Denny introduced them to a

man named Mr. Wickham, who'd recently joined their corps.

Mr. Wickham was completely charming. He had a handsome face, a slender body, and pleasing manners. The whole party was chatting very agreeably when they heard the hoofbeats of horses. Darcy and Bingley were coming down the street!

Bingley greeted Jane happily. He'd been on his way to the house to ask about her health. Darcy bowed to the party. Determined not to fix his eyes on Elizabeth, he suddenly noticed the stranger. Elizabeth happened to see Darcy and Wickham exchange surprised glances. Darcy's face had turned red, and Wickham's had turned white!

What could be the meaning of it? Elizabeth wondered. It was impossible to imagine. And it was just as impossible *not* to wonder about!

4 Wickham's Story

The very next day, Elizabeth discovered the connection between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. She and her sisters, along with Mr. Collins, had been invited to the Philipses' for supper and cards. Mr. Wickham had also been invited. The story Wickham told Elizabeth was quite shocking!

When they were alone, Wickham spoke out. "Elizabeth, you might have noticed the very cold manner of my meeting with Mr. Darcy yesterday. Do you know him well?"

"I know him as well as I ever wish to," Elizabeth said. "I find him very disagreeable."

"I've known Mr. Darcy a great many years," Wickham explained. "My dear father managed Pemberly, the Darcy property. We grew up in the same house. Mr. Darcy's father was a great man—the truest friend I ever had!

When my own father died, Darcy's father promised to help me. In his will, he left me a valuable living. But his son made sure it was given to another man."

"Good heavens!" Elizabeth cried out. "But how could he go against the will? Did you not seek help from a lawyer?"

"I'm afraid the will was very informal," Wickham explained. "There was no hope of going to a lawyer."

"How shocking!" Elizabeth protested. "Darcy deserves to be publicly disgraced."

Wickham frowned. "He will be, some time or other—but not by me," he said. "I care too much for his father's memory."

"I never liked Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said. "But I didn't think him so bad as this."

"Oh, Mr. Darcy does have some good qualities," Mr. Wickham went on. "He gives his money quite freely to the poor. And he's a very thoughtful guardian of his sister. He can be kind when he chooses. But his pride is always with him."

Just then, their quiet conversation was interrupted by Mr. Collins' loud voice. He

was saying something about Lady Catherine de Bourge.

Wickham asked Elizabeth if she knew that Lady Catherine was Mr. Darcy's aunt.

"No, indeed, I did not," Elizabeth said.

"Her daughter is expected to inherit a very large fortune," Wickham went on. "Lady Catherine expects her to marry Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth smiled at the thought of poor Caroline Bingley. All of her attentions to Mr. Darcy had been in vain!

On the way home, she could think of nothing but what Mr. Wickham had told her. When she told Jane, her sister was upset. Yet Jane could not believe ill of Wickham nor Darcy. She insisted there must have been some mistake. Elizabeth, however, was convinced of Darcy's cruelty.

Elizabeth's dislike of Mr. Darcy grew. Two days later, Mr. Bingley gave a ball at Netherfield. Elizabeth arrived in high spirits. She looked around the room eagerly, hoping to find Mr. Wickham. Instead, Mr. Denny told her that his friend wasn't coming. He had no desire to see Mr. Darcy.

While she was talking to Charlotte, Mr. Darcy asked Elizabeth to dance. She was so surprised that she said yes!

For some time they danced in silence. Finally, Elizabeth couldn't resist talking about Mr. Wickham. She told Mr. Darcy that they'd become friends.

Mr. Darcy looked uncomfortable. "Mr. Wickham makes friends very easily. It isn't certain whether he can keep them or not."

"He was certainly unlucky to lose your friendship," Elizabeth said. "He's likely to suffer all his life because of it!"

Darcy made no answer. When the dance finished, they parted in silence.

Elizabeth looked around for Jane, who'd been dancing with Bingley. Jane was glowing when they met. Reading her feelings, Elizabeth was filled with hope for her.

"Tell me, Jane," Elizabeth said. "Have you learned anything more about Mr. Wickham?"

"Mr. Bingley doesn't know the whole story," Jane said. "But he's convinced of Mr. Darcy's honor. Both he and his sister believe that Mr. Wickham is not respectable."

"But Mr. Bingley himself doesn't even know Mr. Wickham," Elizabeth said.

"No, he never even saw him until the other morning at Meryton," Jane agreed.

"I don't doubt Mr. Bingley's sincerity," Elizabeth went on. "But surely he doesn't know the entire story! My opinion of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham is the same."

The rest of the evening was not pleasant. When Mr. Collins spoke to Mr. Darcy without being introduced, he made a fool of himself. During supper, Mrs. Bennet spoke long and loudly to Lady Lucas. The subject was Jane and Bingley—that they would probably be married soon. When Elizabeth begged her mother to lower her voice, Mrs. Bennet scolded her.

Then, Elizabeth's youngest sister, Mary, sang for the guests. Mary's voice was weak and her manner affected. Elizabeth was in agonies of embarrassment.

The next day at the Bennets' house was even more embarrassing. Elizabeth had guessed that Mr. Collins might propose to her—and she was correct. After breakfast, he

asked to speak to her alone.

Mr. Collins was blushing. "Almost as soon as I entered this house, I singled you out as my future wife," he said. "Let me assure you that your lack of fortune will be no obstacle to our happiness. When we are married, dear Elizabeth, I shall never blame you for it."

"But you are too hasty, sir," Elizabeth interrupted. "You forget that I have made no answer. Please accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am honored by your offer. But it is quite impossible for me to accept."

Mr. Collins waved his hand formally. "I know it is usual with young ladies to say no at first. Therefore, I am not discouraged at all."

"Upon my word, sir," Elizabeth stated firmly. "I am *not* one of those young ladies. I am perfectly serious."

"My dearest cousin," Mr. Collins went on, "forgive me if I do not believe you. My situation in life is excellent. My connection with Lady Catherine makes my offer a handsome one. In spite of your many attractions, a poor girl like you may never get another offer of marriage.

Therefore, I believe you mean to make my love stronger by suspense."

The situation was impossible! Not knowing what else to do, Elizabeth left the room. A few minutes later, she was called to the library. Her parents were waiting for her.

"I hear you have refused Mr. Collins," her father said. "Is that true, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, sir," Elizabeth admitted.

Mr. Bennet spoke in a grave voice. "Your mother insists that you accept him. Is this not so, Mrs. Bennet?"

"Yes—or I will never see her again!" Mrs. Bennet whimpered.

Mr. Bennet looked stern. "You have an unhappy choice before you, Elizabeth," he said. "Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins. But *I* will never see you again if you do!"

"*Mr. Bennet!*" his wife cried out. Elizabeth couldn't help but smile.

5 Jane's Disappointment

Mr. Collins' feelings for Elizabeth were imaginary. Only his pride was hurt by her refusal. But the house was in an uproar. Mrs. Bennet was full of complaints and bad humor. When Charlotte Lucas came to spend the day, the entire family was relieved. Charlotte was very kind to Mr. Collins. She listened quietly to everything he had to say.

The next day, a letter was delivered to Jane. Elizabeth watched her read it, and saw her face fall. When they were alone, Jane said, "It's from Caroline Bingley. They've all left for London and may not be back this winter. I'll read you the part that hurts me most:

"Mr. Darcy is impatient to see his sister, and so are we all, I must say. Georgiana Darcy has no equal for beauty and elegance. My brother already likes her very much. We do hope to call

her our sister someday soon.

"Is this not clear enough, dear Lizzy?" Jane cried out. "Caroline makes it plain she doesn't expect *me* to be her sister. She must be sure her brother cares little for me. Can there be any other meaning to what she writes?"

"Yes, there can," Elizabeth said. "Perhaps Caroline sees that her brother's in love with you. Perhaps *she*'s the one who wants him to marry Miss Darcy. She's trying to convince you that her brother does not care for you."

Jane shook her head miserably.

"Jane, try to believe me," Elizabeth said. "No one can doubt his feelings for you. But the case is this: We're not rich enough or grand enough for them. Therefore, she's anxious to get Miss Darcy for her brother."

"I know we don't agree on Caroline's character," Jane said. "But she's not capable of deception. She's just mistaken."

"Believe what you will," Elizabeth said. "But worry no longer."

The Bennets had agreed to dine with the Lucases. Again, Charlotte listened endlessly to Mr. Collins. There was a motive behind her

kindness. She was hoping that Mr. Collins would turn his interest from Elizabeth to herself. When they parted, Charlotte felt hopeful of success—and she was.

Early the next morning, Mr. Collins hurried over to Lucas Lodge. There, he declared his love to Charlotte. Everything was quickly settled, and Sir William and Lady Lucas were joyful.

Charlotte herself was pleased. She knew, of course, that Mr. Collins was neither sensible nor agreeable. His feelings for her were

probably imaginary. But still, he would be her husband. In truth, Charlotte didn't think highly of men or marriage. Yet marriage was the only honorable situation for a woman with little money. She was 27 years old and had never been pretty. To her, Mr. Collins' proposal was great good luck. Her only worry was telling Elizabeth her news.

"You're engaged to Mr. Collins!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "My dear Charlotte—*impossible!*"

Then Elizabeth pulled herself together and quickly wished her friend much happiness.

"I know what you are feeling," Charlotte said. "But when you take time to think it over, you'll understand. I'm not a romantic, you know. I believe my chance of happiness is as good as most people's."

Elizabeth politely agreed—but she was not convinced. Dear Charlotte, as the wife of Mr. Collins, was a most humiliating picture!

When Mrs. Bennet heard of Charlotte's engagement, she was extremely upset. Days went by before she could see Elizabeth without scolding her. Weeks passed before she could speak to Sir William or Lady Lucas

without being rude. And many months had gone by before she finally forgave Charlotte.

Meanwhile, Bingley had been away for several weeks. Not a word had been heard from him. Jane was quiet on the subject. Whatever she was feeling, she didn't wish to discuss. But it was a different matter with their mother. She talked about Mr. Bingley constantly, impatient for his return.

At last a letter from Caroline Bingley put an end to their doubts. She said they were settled in London for the winter. Elizabeth heard the news in silent indignation. She didn't believe Caroline's hints that her brother was falling in love with Miss Darcy. But she was angry with Bingley's weakness. How could his friends influence him so easily?

Jane was sure now that Bingley had never loved her. She couldn't believe Darcy and Bingley's sisters were scheming against her. Suspicion was not in her nature.

In this gloomy period, Mr. Wickham was the family's one comfort. They saw him often. It soon became clear that he preferred Elizabeth to anyone else. Now he told

everyone how badly Darcy had treated him. Everyone was pleased to think how they had disliked Darcy from the beginning.

At Christmas, Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife came to visit. Mr. Gardiner was a sensible, well-bred man—greatly superior to his sister. Mrs. Gardiner was likable and intelligent. She was a favorite with the Bennet girls, especially Elizabeth and Jane.

Elizabeth told her aunt Bingley and Jane's entire story. "Oh, poor Jane!" Mrs. Gardiner said. "She won't get over it quickly. It would have been better if it had happened to you, Lizzy. You would have laughed yourself out of it sooner. Jane should come to London with us. A change of scene might help."

Elizabeth was exceedingly pleased. Jane accepted her aunt's invitation with pleasure. Knowing that Bingley didn't live in the same house as his sisters, she could visit Caroline without any danger of seeing him.

6 Elizabeth Visits Charlotte

Mrs. Gardiner saw that Elizabeth liked Wickham very much. She gave her niece some kindly advice. "Lizzy," she said, "you must be on your guard with Wickham. I have nothing to say against him. If he had the fortune he ought to have, you couldn't do better. But as it is—please don't let your fancy run away with you! Don't disappoint your father."

"At present, I am not in love with Mr. Wickham," Elizabeth answered. "But he is the most agreeable man I ever met. And if he does really become attached to me—but it would be better if he did not! Oh, that abominable Mr. Darcy! But I promise I'll try to do what I think is wisest. Are you satisfied now?"

Her aunt assured her that she was. It was one of those rare and wonderful occasions in which advice wasn't resented.

The Gardiners, with Jane in tow, left for London. A few days later, Mr. Collins arrived at Lucas Lodge. He and his bride-to-be were going to Kent the next day. Before leaving, Charlotte came to say goodbye to Elizabeth.

"I have a favor to ask, Elizabeth," she said. "Will you come and see me?"

Though she saw little pleasure in the visit, Elizabeth couldn't refuse. She agreed to come in March. Sir William would be coming then, along with his second-oldest daughter, Maria.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth waited impatiently for Jane's letters from London. But Jane's news was sad indeed. After a month, she'd seen nothing of Bingley. She'd paid one visit to Caroline, but the visit was not returned for weeks. When Caroline did come at last, she was not polite. Jane wrote:

I am afraid you are quite correct, dearest Lizzy. It seems that Caroline has never liked me. I pity her, but I'm sure that she's concerned for her brother. We know that he never really cared for me, but perhaps she feels differently. Yet I wonder. If he had cared for me, he would have visited me long ago. He knows I'm in town, I am

sure. Yet I cannot understand it. I'm almost tempted to think I have been deceived.

This letter pained Elizabeth. She could no longer wish that Bingley would see Jane again. Indeed, the more she thought about it, the worse his behavior seemed.

January and February passed. Then March arrived, and Elizabeth left to visit Charlotte. On the way to Kent, she stopped in London to see Jane and the Gardiners.

As soon as she could, Elizabeth asked her aunt how Jane was feeling. She was saddened, but not surprised, to hear that Jane was often depressed. Then Mrs. Gardiner asked about Wickham. Elizabeth told her that he now seemed interested in someone else. The young woman's name was Miss King. Her greatest charm was having recently inherited ten thousand pounds! Elizabeth found no fault in his wish to be independent. Wickham had touched her heart only lightly. She believed that she would have been his first choice—if money had been no object.

Before they left, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner invited Elizabeth to take a tour with them in

the summer. Nothing could be more agreeable to Elizabeth. "My dear, dear aunt," she cried. "What delight! Goodbye to disappointment. What are men compared to rocks and mountains?" She left for Kent in good spirits.

Charlotte welcomed her with great pleasure. Mr. Collins was in his glory, pointing out every detail of the fine house. She wondered how her friend could look so content. Most of the time, Charlotte wisely didn't seem to hear him.

Two days later they were invited to dine at Rosings, the estate of Lady Catherine. Mr. Collins' triumph was complete. As they entered the house, he pointed out every magnificent detail. Sir William was awed. Maria seemed frightened out of her wits. Elizabeth was calm and curious.

Lady Catherine was a tall, big-boned woman with strong features. She spoke with natural authority. Her daughter, Miss de Bourge, was very small and sickly looking. Thinking of Darcy, Elizabeth said to herself, "Oh, yes, she'll make him a proper wife."

Dinner was grand indeed. All the servants

and all the silverware that Mr. Collins had promised were there. He complimented Lady Catherine excessively, and Sir William echoed him. Lady Catherine was pleased with the praise. She advised Charlotte about managing her house, her cows, and her poultry. Then she turned to Elizabeth. She asked her about her family, her sisters, and what sort of carriage her father had. Elizabeth felt the impertinence of all these questions. But she answered her politely.

At length, Lady Catherine asked, "Have any of your younger sisters come out?"

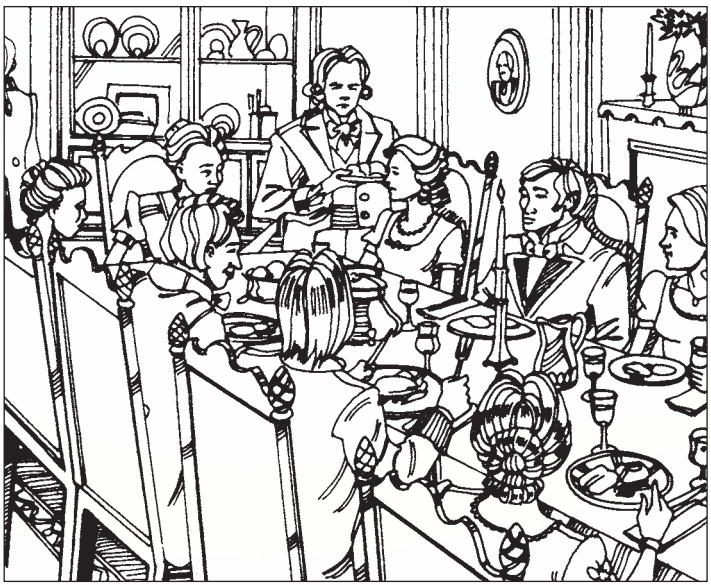
"Yes, ma'am, all of them," Elizabeth said.

"*All!*" Lady Catherine exclaimed. "And the younger ones are out before the elder ones are married? How very *odd!*"

"If the elder sisters do not marry early," Elizabeth answered, "it would be very hard on the younger ones. Surely, the last born have as much right to enter society as the first."

"Upon my word!" Lady Catherine cried. "You give your opinion very freely for such a young person. What is your age?"

"With three sisters grown up," Elizabeth



said with a smile, "your Ladyship can hardly expect me to tell my age."

Lady Catherine seemed very surprised at not receiving a direct answer. "You cannot be more than twenty, I am sure," she said.

"I am not twenty-one," Elizabeth said.

After a very dull game of cards, Elizabeth was greatly relieved when the evening was finally over.

7 Darcy Admits the Truth

After this, they dined at Lady Catherine's estate about twice a week. Elizabeth spent her days walking and in conversation with Charlotte. She noticed that Charlotte often encouraged her husband to spend time out in the garden, or to go to Rosings without her.

When Elizabeth had been at Charlotte's for a fortnight, two visitors arrived at Rosings. One was Mr. Darcy. The other was another nephew of Lady Catherine's. Colonel Fitzwilliam was not handsome, but he was a true gentleman. Elizabeth quickly caught his fancy. The next time Elizabeth came to Rosings, Colonel Fitzwilliam asked her to play the pianoforte.

Mr. Darcy drew near to watch her play.

"You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming to hear me. But I am too stubborn for

that." Then, turning to Colonel Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth said, "I can tell you something quite dreadful about your cousin."

"Pray, let me hear it," the Colonel said.

"The first time I ever saw Mr. Darcy was at a ball," Elizabeth said. "And what do you think he did? He danced only four dances!"

Darcy blushed. "But at that time, I didn't know any of the ladies there."

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled. "True—and nobody can ever be introduced at a ball," she said facetiously.

Darcy was embarrassed. "I find it difficult to speak with people I've never seen before," he said. "It's a talent I don't seem to have."

"I don't have a talent for playing well," Elizabeth said. "But I know I could play much better if I practiced."

Lady Catherine interrupted, demanding to know what they were talking about. Elizabeth immediately began to play.

In the days that followed, the colonel came to visit Elizabeth often. So did Mr. Darcy. It was clear why Colonel Fitzwilliam came—he enjoyed Elizabeth's company. But it was

difficult to understand why Mr. Darcy came. He often sat for ten minutes at a time without opening his mouth.

One day, as Elizabeth walked in the park, she met Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I've heard you're planning to leave Kent soon," she said.

"Yes—if Darcy doesn't put it off again," Colonel Fitzwilliam answered. "He arranges everything as he pleases."

"Mr. Darcy seems to find great pleasure in having his own way," Elizabeth said.

"We all like to have our own way," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "But it's easier for him, because he's a rich man. I speak as a younger son who doesn't get things so easily!"

"In my opinion," Elizabeth said, "the younger son of an earl cannot suffer much."

"But younger sons cannot afford to marry whomever they like," Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

Elizabeth blushed. She wondered if he was talking about her. She answered with a joke, and he replied in the same manner. After a silence, Colonel Fitzwilliam mentioned Mr. Bingley, who he knew a little.

Elizabeth said dryly, "Mr. Darcy seems to

take great care of Mr. Bingley."

"I believe Mr. Bingley owes a great deal to Mr. Darcy," Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

"What do you mean?" asked Elizabeth.

"Mr. Darcy said he'd saved a friend of his from a bad marriage," he said. "I am sure he was talking about Mr. Bingley."

"Did Mr. Darcy tell you just why he'd interfered?" Elizabeth asked.

"It seems there were some very strong objections against the lady," he said.

Elizabeth changed the subject. As soon as she returned to the house, she shut herself in her room. She'd always thought Caroline was the one who separated Jane and Bingley. Now she knew it had been Darcy! The angry tears that followed brought on a headache. That evening, they were to have tea at Rosings. But Elizabeth said she wasn't well.

After everyone had gone, the doorbell rang. To Elizabeth's great surprise, Darcy was at the door.

He asked about her health. She answered with cold politeness. He sat down, then got up and walked about the room. Finally he

said, "This simply won't do! I have struggled in vain. Please let me tell you how much I admire and love you!"

Elizabeth's astonishment was beyond words. She stared at him in silence.

Darcy admitted that he'd cared for her for a long time. Then he declared that he loved her—in spite of her inferior family.

At first, Elizabeth felt honored by his proposal. She was sorry to hurt Darcy by refusing him. But when he spoke of her family, the color rose in her cheeks. "If I could feel grateful for your offer, I would thank you. But I cannot," she said firmly.

Darcy became pale with anger. It was clear he expected her to accept him. "Could you perhaps tell me why I was rejected? And with so little politeness?" he demanded.

"I might as well ask why *you* chose to insult *me!"* she said. "You say that you care for me against your will. But even if I cared for you, how could I accept you? You have ruined my sister's happiness—perhaps forever. Can you deny this?"

"I cannot deny it. I did everything in my

power to separate Bingley from your sister."

"But that's not the only reason for my dislike. Wickham has told me how you treated him. You robbed him of everything that he deserved."

"And this," Darcy cried, "is your opinion of me! I thank you for explaining it."

"And it is not only for these reasons that I dislike you. From the very beginning, I saw your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish scorn for the feelings of others. You are the last man in the world I'd ever marry!"

"You've said quite enough, madam," he cried. "I understand your feelings perfectly. Now I'm only ashamed of what mine have been. Forgive me for taking up so much of your time. And accept my best wishes for your health and happiness."

With these words, he quickly left the house. She felt too weak to stand. She sat down and cried for half an hour. When she heard the carriage outside, she hurried to her room. She couldn't face Charlotte—or anyone else.

8 A Letter for Elizabeth

The next day, Elizabeth was out walking alone in the park. She saw Mr. Darcy coming toward her. Before she could avoid him, he came up to her and said, "I was hoping to see you, Elizabeth. Will you do me the honor of reading this letter?"

When she took the letter, he bowed at the waist and turned away. The letter read:

Do not be alarmed, madam, on receiving this letter. It does not contain another offer of marriage. But I do ask your attention—and your sense of justice.

You have charged me with two different offenses. One charge concerns your sister. The other concerns Mr. Wickham. I will answer the charge regarding your sister first:

Soon after Bingley met your sister, I could tell

he had serious feelings for her. Yet, although your sister seemed to like him, it seemed to me that her heart was not touched. If I was mistaken, I'm sorry I gave her pain.

I did object to Bingley marrying your sister because of your family. I find no fault in the way you and Jane behave. But the behavior of your mother and your younger sisters shows a total lack of propriety. To me, this is far worse than your family's lack of a fortune. Forgive me for saying this—it pains me to offend you.

Bingley's sisters were also worried about their brother's attraction to Miss Bennet. The three of us tried to persuade him not to marry Miss Bennet. This alone would not have discouraged him. His feelings were very strong. But we convinced him that your sister didn't really care for him. This wasn't difficult, as Bingley is a very modest man.

There's one part of this affair that shames me. I knew your sister was in London, but I kept this fact from Bingley. At that time, I felt this was for the best.

As for Mr. Wickham, I can answer this charge in only one way: You must know the

entire truth of his connection to my family. Being very fond of Wickham, my father wished to provide him with a living when he died. Wickham told me he had decided not to join the clergy. By this time, I knew his character well. I agreed that he should not be a clergyman. Instead, he planned to become a lawyer. He asked for money, and I gave him three thousand pounds. Instead of studying law, he spent it all on other things. Then, when the living became vacant, he demanded it for himself. This time, however, I refused to help him. His anger against me was strong indeed.

I saw no more of Wickham until last summer. What happened at that time is painful for me to tell. I have no doubt of your secrecy in this matter. After the death of my father, Colonel Fitzwilliam and I were named guardians of Georgiana, my younger sister. She was living in London last summer with her governess, Mrs. Younge. Unfortunately, we didn't know that Mrs. Younge was a friend of Wickham. Without my knowledge, Wickham began to visit Georgiana. He convinced her that he was in love with her and persuaded her to elope. She was

only 15 at the time, which must be her excuse. But she couldn't bear to hurt me, so she told me her plans. Luckily, I was able to stop the elopement before it took place. Wickham was caught, and Mrs. Younge was fired. I am sure Wickham's chief object was my sister's fortune, which is 30 thousand pounds. I believe he also wanted revenge on me. The revenge he planned would have been complete indeed!

If you doubt what I am saying, you may ask Colonel Fitzwilliam. I will try to put this letter into your hands before he leaves. I will only add, God bless you.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

At first, Elizabeth had a strong prejudice against everything Darcy said. His words showed nothing but pride.

But then she came to the part about Mr. Wickham. She could hardly believe what she read. "This cannot be!" She said to herself. "Mr. Darcy must be lying!"

She read the entire letter, and put it away. She decided she would never look at it again.

Half a minute later, however, she read the

letter again. She began to think about Wickham. She realized she'd known nothing of his past. She remembered his charming manner perfectly. Yet she could not recall anything good or kind he'd done. She decided against talking to Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy wouldn't have mentioned him if his story had been false.

Wickham had said that he'd never slander Darcy, because he'd loved Darcy's father. But as soon as Darcy left for London, he'd told everyone his story. His slander, in fact, had destroyed Darcy's reputation.

She remembered that people close to Darcy thought highly of him. Even Wickham had praised him as a devoted brother.

As she thought it over, Elizabeth became ashamed of herself. She'd been blind and prejudiced about both men!

Elizabeth read the first part of the letter again. She had to give Darcy credit for his observations of Jane. Although her feelings had been deep, Jane didn't show them. Now Elizabeth believed that Bingley had never known Jane was in London. Darcy's letter

cleared Bingley of all blame. She felt heartsick at what Jane had lost.

When Elizabeth re-read the part about her family, she felt great shame. Her younger sisters *were* ignorant and foolish! Lydia would flirt with any officer in her sight, and Kitty followed wherever Lydia led. Her foolish mother only encouraged them by behaving just as poorly. And instead of correcting his daughters, her father made great sport of laughing at them.

Now Elizabeth realized what her family's

behavior had done. It had hurt both her and Jane's chances for marriage! She suddenly felt very depressed.

A few days later, it was time to return home. Lady Catherine paid a last visit to the Collinses. The bossy woman gave them very detailed instructions how to pack. Maria felt that she must have done a very poor job the first time. She re-packed her entire trunk!

As Elizabeth said goodbye to Miss de Bourge and Lady Catherine, she smiled. What if she had accepted Mr. Darcy? She wondered how Lady Catherine would have reacted.

Elizabeth felt sad to leave Charlotte with such a husband as Mr. Collins. Yet she'd chosen him with her eyes open. And—for now—she seemed to be content.

As they drove off, Maria exclaimed, "We have dined nine times with Lady Catherine! I shall have so much to tell!"

"Yes—and *I* shall have so much to keep secret," Elizabeth thought to herself.

9 Elizabeth Changes Her Mind

When Elizabeth finally saw Jane alone, she told her everything—except what she had learned about Bingley. Seeing that Jane loved him still, she wanted to spare her feelings.

But what a blow for Jane to hear about Wickham! It was hard for her to believe that anyone could be so wicked.

"I want your advice on one point," she said. "Should we tell people what we know about Wickham? Lydia says his regiment will leave for Brighton soon. Perhaps I should say nothing about him."

"I think you're quite right," Elizabeth agreed. "He may be very sorry for what he's done. No doubt he's trying to improve."

Wickham did leave for Brighton. Elizabeth was delighted to see him go. But Kitty and Lydia were miserable that the regiment had

gone. "What's to become of us?" they wailed.

Lydia's gloom, however, was soon cleared away. She was invited to Brighton to stay with Mrs. Forster, the young wife of the regiment's colonel. In the last couple of months, she and Lydia had become close friends. Lydia was in ecstasy.

Elizabeth secretly advised her father not to let Lydia go to Brighton. She worried that her sister would become even wilder when she was alone and away from home.

Mr. Bennet only laughed at her. "But we shall have no peace if Lydia does *not* go to Brighton! Luckily, she is too poor for any man to take advantage of her."

Elizabeth had to be satisfied with this answer. Lydia left soon after the regiment. With the officers gone, there were fewer parties. The summer passed slowly. Elizabeth waited impatiently to begin her travels with the Gardiners.

Finally, in mid-July, her aunt and uncle arrived. As their trip began, they traveled to many parts of Derbyshire, enjoying each other's company thoroughly. August found

them in the little town of Lambton, staying at an inn. Lambton, Elizabeth learned, was only five miles from Pemberly. Years ago, Mrs. Gardiner had visited Pemberly, and now she wished to visit it again.

Pemberly—the Darcy estate! Just the possibility of meeting Mr. Darcy at Pemberly made Elizabeth blush. It would be dreadful! She decided to speak openly to her aunt. But then she learned that Mr. Darcy would be away from Pemberly for the summer. So off they went to Pemberly.

Her spirits were in high flutter as the carriage drove toward Pemberly House. It was a large and handsome stone building, with a stream in front. They were greeted by the housekeeper. She was an elderly woman, and very respectable looking.

After welcoming them, the housekeeper led them on a tour of the house. Elizabeth was lost in admiration. The rooms were handsome indeed and decorated in fine taste.

"And I might have been mistress of this place!" Elizabeth thought. "But, no, my dear aunt and uncle would then have been lost to

me. Mr. Darcy would have never allowed them to visit here."

At one point, the housekeeper pointed out a drawing of Mr. Darcy. "And this," she said proudly, "is my master."

"You seem to be quite proud of him," Elizabeth said.

"He is the best master who ever lived!" the housekeeper said. "He's not like most of the wild young men nowadays—who think of nothing but themselves! Not one of his servants will give him a bad name. Some people call him proud, but I'm sure I never saw anything of it. They say that only because he doesn't chatter away as some men do!"

Elizabeth's view of Mr. Darcy softened. "Can this be the real Mr. Darcy?" she wondered. The housekeeper's praise was no small matter. What praise is more valuable than that of an intelligent servant?

When they finished looking at the house, they walked outside. Just as they did, a young man came around the corner. It was none other than Mr. Darcy!

He seemed frozen in surprise. He and

Elizabeth blushed and stared at each other.

Then he stepped forward and politely asked about her family.

Elizabeth's embarrassment was extreme. Yet she wondered at how changed he was. Never had he seemed so gentle. In spite of everything, she longed to know if he still loved her.

When he asked her to introduce him to the Gardiners, she could hardly keep from smiling. Here was her family, which he had scorned. Yet now Darcy was all courtesy. Elizabeth was pleased as he spoke to her uncle. Here, at least, were family members who would not make her blush. Everything her uncle said showed his intelligence and good manners.

Before leaving, Elizabeth told Darcy that she'd not expected him to be at Pemberly. He replied that he'd been traveling ahead of his party. Then he added, "There's one person in the party who especially wants to meet you, Elizabeth. Will you allow me to introduce you to my sister?"

Elizabeth was flattered and pleased. This

was a compliment of the highest kind!

The next day, Mr. Darcy and his sister came to visit Elizabeth at the inn.

Georgiana Darcy was a great surprise to Elizabeth. She seemed as embarrassed as Elizabeth. Wickham had said Miss Darcy was very proud. Instead, she was quite shy.

Mr. Darcy told Elizabeth that Bingley was also coming. In a few minutes, they heard his quick step on the stairs. On seeing Bingley, Elizabeth's thoughts flew to her sister. She watched him speak to Miss Darcy, who was supposed to be Jane's rival. But Elizabeth saw no attraction between them.

After going to bed that night, Elizabeth lay awake for hours. She tried to decide how she felt about Mr. Darcy. Her feelings of strong dislike had disappeared. Now she felt very grateful. It seemed he loved her still! She respected him and had an interest in his happiness. If she chose, she felt she still had the power to make him happy.

The next day, they were invited to dine at Pemberly. All eyes were on Darcy and Elizabeth. No one watched them more closely

than Caroline Bingley. Hoping to put Elizabeth in a bad light, Caroline asked, "The soldiers have left Meryton, have they not? It must be a great loss to your family."

Caroline didn't mention Wickham's name, but Elizabeth felt distressed. While she answered calmly, she glanced over at Darcy. Embarrassed, he earnestly studied her face. Georgiana seemed much too overcome with embarrassment to look at anyone. Caroline had no idea that she was hurting Georgiana far more than Elizabeth!

When Elizabeth left, Caroline remarked, "How very poorly Elizabeth Bennet looked. But I never could see any beauty in her!"

Jealous people are not always wise. She looked at Darcy. "I believe you thought her rather pretty at one time."

"Yes, but that was only when I first knew her," Darcy replied. "Now I believe she's one of the prettiest women I've ever met!"

He then left. Caroline Bingley had forced him to hurt no one but herself.

A Family Scandal

Elizabeth had been waiting impatiently for a letter from Jane. Finally, two letters arrived on the same day. While her aunt and uncle were out, Elizabeth opened the first one. It read:

Dearest Lizzy:

Something very serious has happened. Please don't be alarmed—we are all well. What I have to tell you concerns poor Lydia. An express letter came last night from Colonel Forster. Lydia has eloped with one of his officers—Wickham! I'm sorry for Lydia. But at least he isn't marrying her out of greed. He must know that father can give her nothing. I must go, for I cannot leave poor mother alone for long.

The next letter had been written a day later. It read:

Dearest Lizzy:

I hardly know what to write. We're not certain that Lydia and Wickham have been married at all! A friend of Wickham's has confessed to Colonel Forster that Wickham had no intention of marrying her. Father and Mother fear the worst. I can hardly believe it, but Colonel Forster says Wickham is not a man to be trusted. As far as we can tell, they went to London. Colonel Forster and Father are in London now, trying to find them. I hope our uncle will be kind enough to join them. I beg you, dearest Lizzy, to return home as soon as possible.

When she finished reading, Elizabeth darted from her seat. "Oh, where is my uncle?" she cried. As she reached the door, it was opened by a servant. Mr. Darcy stepped inside.

Her pale face shocked him. "Good God! What's the matter?" he cried out.

"I've had some dreadful news from home," she said before bursting into tears. For a few minutes she couldn't speak. Finally, she went

on. "This news cannot be kept secret from anyone. My youngest sister, Lydia, has run off—with Mr. Wickham! You know him too well to doubt the rest."

Darcy stared in astonishment. "I'm grieved—shocked!" he exclaimed. "What has been done to find her?"

"My father has gone to London," she said. "Jane has written to ask our uncle's help. But I have no hope. What can we do with a man like Wickham? It is horrible!"

Darcy hardly seemed to hear her. He walked up and down the room. A gloomy expression was on his face. Now Elizabeth understood her own feelings. Now—when it was hopeless—she realized how much she could have loved him!

Soon after Darcy said goodbye, her aunt and uncle returned. Trembling, Elizabeth read them the letters. Her uncle quickly offered to help. An hour later, they were seated in the carriage, headed toward the Bennets' house.

As they rode, Elizabeth's thoughts turned to Lydia again and again. She'd never noticed that Lydia had preferred Wickham to any of

the other officers. Sometimes one officer, sometimes another had been her favorite. It seemed that poor Lydia was eager to attach herself to *anybody!*

Arriving at home, Elizabeth found her mother in bed. Mrs. Bennet greeted them with noisy tears. She blamed everyone but herself for Lydia's fate. "I am sure the Forsters neglected poor Lydia," she said. "She's not the kind of child to do such a thing. Poor girl! Oh, I have such tremblings all over me. And pains in my head. I cannot rest by night or day. And now Mr. Bennet's gone away. I know that he will fight Wickham. If he's killed, what will become of us?"

Everyone tried to calm her down. Mr. Gardiner assured her that he would travel to London the very next day.

Later, Jane showed Elizabeth the letter Lydia had written to Mrs. Forster. It read:

You'll laugh tomorrow when you know where I've gone. I cannot help laughing myself to imagine your surprise tomorrow morning. I'm going to be married! And if you cannot guess

who I'm marrying, I shall think you a simpleton! If you don't want to, you needn't send word to my family. It will be an even bigger surprise when I write to them—and sign my name Lydia Wickham!

"Oh, thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia!" Elizabeth cried out. "But at least this shows she was serious about getting married. Our poor father! How he must have felt!"

"I never saw anyone look quite so shocked," Jane said. "For ten minutes or so, he couldn't speak a word."

They waited anxiously for a letter from Mr. Bennet. Instead, a letter addressed to him arrived from Mr. Collins. Jane had received directions to open all of her father's mail. She opened the letter and read:

I feel I must comfort your family during this sad time. Your distress must be of the worst kind—for time will not heal it! Indeed, the death of your daughter would be a blessing compared to this scandal. It must be especially painful for you, since it is clear you've been too

lenient with her. All of us, including Lady Catherine, agree that you deserve our pity. But such a false step by one daughter will hurt all of them! For who would connect themselves with such a family? Let me advise you, dear sir, to cut off all your affection for this unworthy child.

The next letter they received was from Mr. Gardiner. He told them Wickham had left Brighton because of his many gambling debts. He owed more than a thousand pounds! Mr. Gardiner then added that Lydia's father had become discouraged in his search. He'd be arriving home soon.

Mrs. Bennet was not so concerned for her husband's safety as before. "What!" she cried. "Coming home without Lydia? Who will fight Wickham and force him to marry her?"

Mr. Bennet was in a dark mood when he returned home. Elizabeth tried to comfort him, but he said, "For once in my life, Lizzy, let me feel how much I'm to blame. But I'm not afraid of being overpowered with my guilt. It will pass away soon enough."

11 Lydia's Return

Two days after Mr. Bennet returned home, he received a letter from Mr. Gardiner. After reading it, he went out walking. When Elizabeth and Jane found him, he handed the letter to Elizabeth. She read:

At last I have news of my niece. I have seen them both. They are not yet married. But if you consent to the following agreement, I hope they will be soon. All that is required is Lydia's share of her inheritance and one hundred pounds a year. Send back an answer as soon as you can.

Mr. Bennet shook his head sadly. "No man in his senses would marry Lydia for so little!" he said. "I need to know how much money your uncle has given Wickham. How am I ever going to repay him?"

Unlike her husband, Mrs. Bennet was joyful. It had been a fortnight since she'd come downstairs. But that night, she took her seat at the head of the table. "My dear, dear Lydia!" she cried. "Married at sixteen! How I long to see her—and dear Wickham, too! Now she must have clothes and servants. And she must not live more than 10 miles away. I couldn't bear it."

Mr. Bennet let her talk while the servants were present. But when they left, he said, "Mrs. Bennet, wherever they live, there is one house they will never enter—this one."

A long argument followed, but Mr. Bennet was firm. He refused to give Lydia a single pound for clothes.

As Elizabeth listened, she thought of Mr. Darcy. Now she was sorry she'd told him about Lydia and Wickham. Yet the situation was hopeless. How could Darcy ever join a family that included Wickham?

She finally understood that she and Darcy would have suited each other perfectly. Her liveliness would have softened his stiff manner. His judgment and knowledge of the

world would have improved her mind.

Mr. Gardiner wrote once more to say the marriage would take place in a few days. Wickham would be joining the army and then be moving north. Before he left, he and Lydia hoped to visit the family.

Jane and Elizabeth felt that Lydia should be allowed to visit. They urged Mr. Bennet so earnestly that he finally agreed.

Wickham and Lydia came. Lydia was the same as ever—noisy, wild, and fearless. She demanded congratulations from everyone. Wickham, too, showed no sign of shame for what he'd done.

Elizabeth was disgusted. She quickly saw that Lydia cared more for Wickham than he did for her. Why had he run away with her at all? But then she remembered that he'd left Brighton because of his debts. Her uncle must have given him money!

Soon after her arrival, Lydia insisted on telling Elizabeth and Jane about the wedding. "We were to be at the church at eleven o'clock," she said. "Then my uncle was called away on business. I was afraid he'd be late.

But then I remembered that Mr. Darcy could have taken his place—"

"*Mr. Darcy!*" Elizabeth cried out.

"Oh!" Lydia cried out. "That was supposed to be a secret!"

"Don't say another word," Jane said.

Elizabeth was burning with curiosity. As soon as she was alone, she wrote to her aunt. She asked why Mr. Darcy had been at Lydia's wedding.

Her aunt very quickly sent a reply. Mr. Darcy had gone to visit Mrs. Younge, Georgiana's former governess. At first, Mrs. Younge refused to say a word. But eventually Darcy was able to find out where the couple was staying. After meeting with Wickham several times, Darcy worked out an agreement with him—by paying for everything.

The letter confused Elizabeth. Her heart said that Darcy had done it all for her. But her head couldn't believe it.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Bennet had news that Bingley was returning to Netherfield Hall.

"As soon as Bingley comes," she said to her husband, "you must visit him."

Mr. Bennet refused.

But this time, it was Mr. Bingley who came to visit. Mr. Darcy was with him. Mrs. Bennet was overly gracious to Mr. Bingley—and rude to Mr. Darcy. Jane managed to be calm, but Elizabeth was very uneasy. She waited to see how Darcy would behave.

Darcy was nearly silent for the entire visit.

"Why did he come?" Elizabeth wondered.

Jane was happier than she dared to admit. A few days later, Bingley came again, alone. With high hopes, Mrs. Bennet called Mary, Elizabeth, and Kitty upstairs. As soon as Jane and Bingley were alone, he proposed.

When he left, Jane came to Elizabeth, glowing with joy. "It is too much!" she said. "Far too much. Oh, Elizabeth! I don't deserve such happiness!"

Elizabeth thought to herself, "So this is the end of all Darcy's worrying and Caroline's lies. What a happy ending, indeed!"

12 Three Married Daughters

About a week after Bingley and Jane were engaged, Elizabeth had a visitor—Lady Catherine de Bourge. After greeting Mrs. Bennet quite ungraciously, Lady Catherine demanded to see Elizabeth alone.

"You must know why I've come," she said.

Elizabeth was astonished. "Indeed, I do not, madam."

Lady Catherine looked very angry. "Miss Bennet," she said. "I will not be trifled with. Two days ago I learned that you were engaged to my nephew, Mr. Darcy. I'm certain this must be an outrageous lie. But still, I had to find out for myself."

"If you believe it to be impossible, I wonder why you took the trouble of coming so far," Elizabeth said.

"Can you tell me there's no truth to this

outrageous lie?" Lady Catherine demanded.

"I will not be as frank as your Ladyship," Elizabeth said coolly. "You ask questions I may not choose to answer."

"You must tell me once and for all—are you engaged to Mr. Darcy?" Lady Catherine snapped.

"I am not," Elizabeth said firmly.

"And will you promise *never* to enter into such an engagement?" said Lady Catherine.

"No, I'll make no promise of the kind," Elizabeth answered.

Lady Catherine stormed off angrily.

A few days later, Bingley came to visit with Mr. Darcy. Wishing to be alone with Jane, he suggested a walk. Soon he and Jane were lagging behind Elizabeth and Darcy. "You are too kind to trifle with me," Darcy said. "If you feel about me as you did last year, please tell me so at once. My feelings for you are unchanged. But just one word from you will silence me forever."

Then Elizabeth shyly told him that her feelings had changed completely.

Her words made him happier than he'd

ever been before! Then he told her how much he cared for her. She was unable to look at him, but she listened closely. Everything he said made his love more valuable.

They walked on without knowing where they were going. As they talked, she learned that she owed all her happiness to Lady Catherine! She'd immediately gone to Darcy after leaving the Bennets' house.

"What Lady Catherine said allowed me to hope," Darcy said. "I knew you would have told her frankly if you didn't care for me."

"Yes, you know enough of my frankness," Elizabeth said, blushing. "I was horrible to you when you first proposed."

"I deserved everything you said to me," Darcy insisted. "When I was growing up, I was spoiled by my good parents. I'm afraid I became conceited and proud. Oh, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! You taught me a valuable lesson. How much I owe you! I've tried hard to change ever since I met you."

"And one of these changes was to allow Mr. Bingley to marry Jane?" Elizabeth asked.

"*Allow!*" Mr. Darcy cried. "Let me tell you

what happened. I confessed everything to Bingley. I admitted that I'd known your sister was in town, and kept it from him! He was angry, as I well deserved. But he forgave me anyway. Once I convinced him of your sister's love, he was too happy to be angry."

Elizabeth smiled at how easily Darcy had directed his friend. But she said nothing. Darcy had not yet learned to be the target of laughter. It was rather too early to begin.

They walked for miles because there was so much to say and to feel! Then at last, all was settled between them. Now the happy news must be shared with her family.

First, Elizabeth told Jane and then her father. They could scarcely believe her. It took Elizabeth some time to explain her change of heart. Then she told them what Darcy had done for Lydia.

Her mother needed no explanations. When Elizabeth told her of the engagement, she sat quite still, unable to say a word. Then she got up, sat down, and blessed herself.

Finally, Mrs. Bennet said, "Good gracious! Mr. Darcy! Oh, my sweetest Lizzy! How rich

and how great you will be! Such a charming man! So handsome! So tall! Please let me apologize for disliking him so much before now. Oh, my! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Bless me!"

* * * *

Her three daughters' marriages did not change Mrs. Bennet's character, however. She was still often nervous and always silly.

After Elizabeth's marriage, Mr. Bennet missed her very much. He took great delight in visiting Pemberly, however—especially when he was not expected.

Jane and Bingley remained at Netherfield a year and then moved to Derbyshire. Jane and Elizabeth were now only 30 miles apart, which added to their happiness.

Kitty visited her older sisters often. Over time, her character was greatly improved by their company. Lydia invited her also, but Mr. Bennet always forbade it. Mary remained at home, for her mother couldn't bear to be without a daughter's company.

Mr. Wickham was never allowed to visit Pemberly. But Elizabeth often sent money to

him and Lydia, since they always seemed to need it! For Elizabeth's sake, Darcy also helped Wickham in his profession.

Georgiana Darcy now lived at Pemberly. She and Elizabeth grew to love each other. At first, Georgiana was astonished at the lively way Elizabeth spoke to her older brother. But she learned that a woman may take liberties with her husband.

Miss Bingley was mortified by Darcy's marriage. But she was very fond of Georgiana. Therefore, she was always very polite to Elizabeth when she visited Pemberly.

Lady Catherine was still upset with Darcy. She sent him a letter saying exactly what she thought of his marriage—and his wife. For a time, Darcy wouldn't write to her or visit Rosings. But Elizabeth eventually persuaded him to reconcile with her.

The Gardiners visited Pemberly often. Darcy and Elizabeth loved them. They never forgot that it was the Gardiners who had brought them together!

PRIDE and PREJUDICE

JANE AUSTEN

Silly Mrs. Bennet is "husband hunting" for her five daughters. Heaven knows it isn't easy! Darcy would make a great match for Elizabeth—if it weren't for his false pride and her stubborn prejudice. And the other girls aren't cooperating, either. Jane is too shy to show affection, and Lydia has run off with an unsuitable army officer! What's a poor mother to do?

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